

## Proposal Information of Contribution 1958

**ID: 1958 / 04 SES 02 B: 3**

**04. Inclusive Education**

**Paper**

*Alternative EERA Network: 22. Research in Higher Education*

*Keywords: educational counselor, inclusion, organizational change, higher education*

### **The Educational Counselor as an Agent of Inclusion and Organizational Change in higher education: a case study**

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OECD (OECD, 2011) and the Academic Network of European Disability (Ebersold, Schmitt & Priestley, 2011) have stated an increase over time of actions and strategies to support the inclusion of non traditional students and students with special needs in Higher Education.

EC (Eurydice, 2014) has highlighted the growing presence of students who (thanks to the international and national official policies) are aware of their rights to participate to higher education processes.

HE institutions have been increasingly challenged to design and provide a diverse array of admissions and support strategies for these students in relation to accessibility policies, housing and transport, advice, counselling and mentoring services, technological facilities.

The adoption of specific services and solutions does not imply the activation of inclusive processes; inclusion requires a deep contextual transformation in cultures, policies and practices engaging multiple actors and the organizations themselves (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Moreover, it requires the mobilization of competences, resources, strategies which define new roles and functions as the one of the educational counselor, who interacts not only with the students, but with faculty members, the institutional governance and other actors.

Several recent studies have explored the condition of non traditional students in higher education contexts either in Europe and other countries, mainly focusing on students' attitudes, motivations, opinions and responses.

An exploration of the role of other institutional actors, and of the processes of institutional and organizational change activated by the challenge of including non traditional students and students with special needs, offers another perspective from which the process of inclusion can be understood.

The study focuses on the process of construction and re-construction of the professional agency of the educational counselors working within the Center for Active and Participated Inclusion of the Students at the University of Naples Federico II, which operates according to an interdisciplinary approach, involving a continuous reflective engagement of different professionals (educational counselors, psychologists, technicians) on issues and problems emerging from professional practice within a complex organizational context.

The questions guiding process of inquiry have been formalized on the basis of the ecological observation of the professional engagement of educational counselors in a number of practices, as well on the reflective positioning of the counselors within their practices, and on their transactional relationship with the context.

- How are the roles and functions of educational counselors working in a Center for Participative Inclusion shaped and modelled by the context in an inclusive (or more inclusive) way?
- How and to which extent educational counselors agency and practice contribute to the development of inclusive (or more inclusive) attitudes and discourses within an higher education context?
- How and to which extent educational counselors agency and practice contribute to the development of an inclusive (or more inclusive) culture within an higher education context?
- How and to which extent educational counselors agency and practice contribute to the development of inclusive (or more inclusive) policies within an higher education context?
- How and to which extent educational counselors agency and practice contribute to the development of inclusive (or more inclusive) practices within an higher education context?

The objectives of the research are:

- to detect and identify the elements that have progressively characterized the definition of a specific educational agency (according to a specific professional epistemology and professional identity) acknowledged as an agent of inclusion in educational context;
- to detect and identify the organizational changes produced by the performances of an inclusive educational agency within an higher education context in terms of attitudes, cultures, policies and practices.
- to identify indicators and patterns of change either in the professional epistemology of educational counselors or in the contextual elements characterizing the organization.

#### *Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used*

The paper describes in the format of a case study (Yin, 2009) a qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Cresswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013); developed over seven years (2010-2017), aimed at exploring the progressive definition of the role and functions of the educational counselor as an agent of inclusion and organizational change within an higher education context.

The reference to a phenomenological framework implies that the first task of the researchers is to "construct" the studied object, according to its own. The research has been developed according to a phenomenological design (Groenewald, 2004) aimed at describing how the progressive unfolding of a specific educational agency within an educational context has determined significant changes in attitudes, behaviours, cultures, policies and practices, according to an inclusive perspective (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), but also how the context requests have detected, developed, modelled and shaped professional agency, competences and practices, according to a co-evolutionary (an therefore inclusive) pattern.

According to this framework, we have explored the phenomenon identified (the progressive development of an inclusive educational agency and professional identity and its impact on attitudes, cultures, policies and practices within an higher education context, in terms of organizational change) according to a contextualist, ecological and situated approach, taking into account and interrogating the contextual elements that have contributed to its emergence and unfolding, analyzing the common ground of the phenomena and their meaning (Padilla Diaz, 2015).

A context should be understood as the complex interchange of actors, scopes and memories (Cohen and Siegel, 1991); accordingly, we have focused on these three elements engaging the actors (educational counselors, other professionals, students, professors, administrative staff) with interviews, ecological observations, informal talks, and self reports; identifying the contextual explicit and implicit scopes (analyzing different kinds of official and non official documents and discourses); exploring individual and collective memories (in different forms: anecdotal, introspective, retrospective through shared narratives and stories).

We have used a qualitative and phenomenological framework in order to collect and decode the data, which have been first interpreted according to emerging categories on the basis of the identification of themes and subthemes. Subsequently, we have corroborated the outcomes of the interpretative process by presenting and discussing the data analysis between the researchers and the other actors involved.

Furthermore, we have engaged as coders two other external researchers, in order to seek correspondence between the relevant themes (and subthemes) identified and the categories emerging from the data analysis.

#### *Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings*

The outcomes of the research are aimed at planning and supporting the implementation of inclusive processes within higher education

contexts on the basis of clearly defined indicators and patterns.

Accordingly, the outcomes expected are:

the identification of clear indicators and patterns of epistemological change (either in the professional profile and in professional practices of the educational counselors);

the identification of indicators and patterns contextual and organizational change (in the forms of agency, in the activities and solutions legitimated and performed within the organization, in the discourses, forms of interaction, the policies and processes activated);

the identification of clear interconnection between the actions and interventions planned and performed by the educational counselors and the contextual and organizational changes, according to an inclusive paradigm.

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